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Cover sheet

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Recent Rural Community Studies

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Recent Rural Community Studies

Abstract

This article examines recent rural community studies by considering, in turn: comparisons; methods; theories; and community studies as vehicles for developing social scientific arguments. 'Recent' is defined as from 1980 onwards. 'Rural' is taken to include research conducted in country towns. And 'community studies' is understood as an inclusive term embracing various research methodologies. Because this field cannot be covered exhaustively, attention is focused on research that has a special bearing on the future of community studies. Particular reference is made to the work of Colin Bell, which helped to shape recent research agendas.

Keywords: community studies; rural; ethnography; Bell

Introduction

Glass's dismissive view that community studies are 'The poor sociologist's substitute for the novel' is cited in the opening line of *Community Studies* (Bell and Newby 1971: 13). The discussion there of the genre and the selection of material included in the edited volume *The Sociology of Community* (Bell and Newby 1974) contested Glass's suggestion that community studies are inherently flawed, since these publications reveal robustness and imagination in the ways that community studies have been undertaken and presented. Recent rural community studies reinforce this point. Contesting Glass's judgement does not mean that community studies are faultless, however. Rather, the point at issue is what community studies at their best have the potential to contribute to the development of social science.

Comparisons

Comparing the findings of traditional community studies is undoubtedly difficult. Stacey highlighted this problem when observing that: 'The most valuable researches in the field of sociology are those which can be used comparatively' (1969: 138). The methodologies and the theoretical frameworks employed by researchers were frequently poorly described. This made it hard to draw comparative conclusions about the findings of different studies. Because comparisons can be across space or across time, three solutions can be identified to this problem of community studies monographs standing alone, thereby facilitating the development of cumulative knowledge. One is for research to be framed in an explicitly cross-national way, comparing in one study communities in different countries. Alongside urban studies such as Hashimoto's (1996) analysis of aging in Japanese and American communities, there are rural studies such as Erickson's (1997) in which she explores the environment and consumerism in two 'suburbanizing small towns' (1997: 22) in Sweden and the USA. Another example is Hedley's (1996) comparison of rural communities in New Zealand and Canada.

Logistical and linguistic reasons make such studies rare. These problems are less marked in research that follows the second path, studying two or more communities within one country. Bulmer (1986) and Warwick and Littlejohn (1992) report on findings in this mould, and Cohen's (1982, 1986) edited collections bring together reports from British rural community studies that invite comparison, although not of the form described as 'cold-blooded comparative sociology' (Cohen 1982: 1).

Thompson and his colleagues' work is similarly innovative, since its authors 'deliberately cross the boundaries of sociology, anthropology and history' in their

analysis of British fishing communities past and present that they undertook in pursuit of ‘worthwhile comparison’ (Thompson *et al.* 1983: 3, 368). Also noteworthy is Guldin’s (2001) account of rural change in contemporary China. In conducting this study, ‘The holy grail of western anthropological fieldwork, the year of immersion within one village or field site, yielded to the common contemporary Chinese practice of multiple short-term visits to a number of villages or field sites. Depth yielded to breadth’, allowing change across a wide area to be captured. The resultant account of ‘decollectivization’, ‘deagriculturalization’ and ‘townizing’ (2001: 1-8) contrasts with Kideckel’s study of one Romanian commune in which he argues that ‘community uniqueness is not problematic but in itself has explanatory power’ (1993: 5).

A third response to the criticism that community studies do not generate comparative findings is the re-study. Examples of urban re-studies (such as Phillipson *et al.*’s (2001) revisiting of East London over four decades on from Young and Willmott’s original studies, and Bryson and Winter’s (1999) re-study of ‘Newtown’ in Australia a quarter of a century on from Bryson and Thompson’s original study) come to mind more readily than do recent examples of rural re-studies. The status of the four mining communities studied by Warwick and Littlejohn (1992) in terms of being urban or rural is ambiguous, just as had been the case for ‘Ashton’ in Dennis *et al.*’s (1956/1969) original study, which Frankenberg described as ‘the town that is a village’ (1969: ch.5). Warwick and Littlejohn’s communities are described as being ‘in an area.... of small towns and villages’ (1992: 89). The rapid decline of coal mining at the time of the re-study meant that it shared many characteristics with areas previously dependent on agriculture and other primary industries where employment has contracted sharply. Scheper-Hughes’s (2001) return visit to ‘Ballybran’ in Ireland

was not a full re-study, but her quarter of a century absence did allow her to reflect about change. Dempsey's research visits to 'Smalltown' in Australia spanned almost two decades, and although *A Man's Town* (1992) is not a re-study of *Smalltown* (1990), the two studies do have comparative elements.

There is potential for more comparative studies of different communities and for more re-studies of the same communities than have yet taken place. None has been so extensively revisited as Middletown, the pseudonym of the Lynds' urban study and re-study from the earlier part of the twentieth century that has now been re-studied so many times that Vidich can refer to 'the science of Muncieology' (2000: ix). The publication of a new (2000) edition of Vidich and Bensman's *Small Town in a Mass Society* over four decades on from the original also indicates enduring interest in classic studies as benchmarks of change. This study's account of the integration of 'Springdale' into the wider society matters in discussions of comparisons because it made 'it less possible than ever to talk realistically about a rural urban dichotomy or even a continuum' (Bell and Newby 1971: 116). Rural-urban comparisons have lost much of their original rationale in the context of what Newby calls 'urbanisation in the countryside' (1980: 277). The erosion of distinctive town and country ways of life has produced communities such as Melko *et al's* (1994) 'metropolitan village'. Such phenomena undermine the idea that social relations are determined by where they take place. As Bulmer notes: 'The problem is that while towns, villages and suburbs do indeed display distinctive patterns of neighbouring, no specifically urban, rural or similar locational feature can be found to cause those patterns' (1986: 37-8). Despite this, comparative analysis involving rural community studies remains valuable. The spatial patterning of social relationships is revealing about the uneven distribution of

material resources, for example, and also about cultural conceptions of the spatial distribution of populations.

The value of thinking comparatively about how community is manifested in different societies is highlighted by the material considered by Bell and Newby (1971) (with their focus on American and European studies) and the further material included in their (1974) edited volume. Bell's (1977) reflections on his experiences of working on the Banbury re-study also highlight the value of comparison, as well as sounding notes of caution about analysing re-study data. Re-studies conducted by different researchers have greater potential to generate 'variation in findings' (Bell and Newby 1971: 75) than do re-studies conducted by the same researcher or research team.

Methods

Extensive reconsideration of research methods has produced growing awareness of the potential for comparative analysis in community studies. Hall suggests that the revival of interest in community studies 'is largely attributable to the fact that the field has been significantly reconstructed. Community, as such, has ceased to be the *object* of study and the approach has come increasingly to be viewed as a *method* of study by which sociological issues can be explored within a local setting' (1990: 101, emphases in original). This echoes Goffman's recognition during his Shetland island research that 'a study that occurred *in* a community' was not necessarily a 'study *of* a community' (cited in Winkin 1999: 26, emphases in original). Hall's (1990) work is one of several recent rural community studies to employ innovative methods of drawing on historical material, in his case checking land records against local people's recollections. Maclean's (1997) analysis of historical records likewise

revealed that widely-held beliefs about migration patterns do not stand up to scrutiny. Jamieson and Toynbee note how in their research into memories of childhood in rural Scotland ‘we deliberately encouraged our interviewees to introduce topics *they* thought would be relevant’ (1992: 219, emphasis in original). This reduced the risk of imposing academic preconceptions. And Harper’s research in upstate New York has pioneered ‘photo elicitation’ (2001: 16) as a method of gaining a sense of change, prompting respondents’ memories by using old photographs that provide ‘visions of a lost agriculture’.

Neither Harper’s (2001) work nor that by Jamieson and Toynbee (1992) is a community study in the sense of research undertaken in one bounded location, but both are revealing about past community life. It is an axiom of network analysis that community relationships frequently spill over neighbourhood boundaries. As Wellman notes: ‘The essence of social network analysis is that it does not assume that the world is always composed of normatively guided individuals aggregated into bounded groups’ (1999: 94). This has long been recognised. The diagrammatic representation of Rees’s (1951) portrayal of kinship networks in mid-20th-century rural Wales as ‘woven together “like a pig’s entrails”’ shows network connections only within the parish, but Rees was well aware of increasing interconnectedness with the world outside. This was the product of ‘The modern system [that] uproots the ablest members of the community and scatters them indiscriminately into official positions up and down the country’. Rees’s description of these ‘birds of passage’ in the context of people being ‘on the move and on the make’ (1951: 75-6, 165) betrays hostility to such mobility, but the important point is that classic rural community studies such as Rees’s, and Williams’s (1963) analysis of the dynamic nature of

‘Ashworthy’, did not portray static and enclosed worlds. Gilligan’s (1987) work on Padstow’s migration patterns echoes this theme. Bell recounted how in the 1960’s the new literature encouraged him to approach local social relations ‘*sociologically* as opposed to geographically’ and made him ‘less inclined to want to put everything on a map’ (1990: 15, emphasis in original). Consequently, his *Middle Class Families* (1968) distinguished between the impact of social mobility on families and the impact of geographical mobility on neighbourhoods.

Recent rural community studies continue to grapple with migration, mobility, and other aspects of community dynamics. Sometimes, like Okely’s *The Traveller-Gypsies*, studies have been undertaken of what are literally mobile communities, although this is merely an extreme case of the more general issue of how communities manage mobility. As a result, ‘the notions of a “real” or artificially bounded “community” confront any researcher, whether or not the subject includes nomads’ (1983: 48). Geographical mobility may, paradoxically, strengthen rather than weaken community boundaries, or at least their cultural or symbolic expression. Cohen observes that ‘The strength of local culture.... does not necessarily diminish as the locality becomes increasingly precarious: quite often the reverse seems to be the case, when the maintenance of the culture becomes the effective *raison d’être* of the peripheral community’ (1982: 7). The distinction between insiders and outsiders unsurprisingly continues to be an important theme in community studies (Crow and Maclean 2006: 307), although length of residence does not necessarily determine an individual’s insider/outsider status (Crow *et al.* 2001).

The insider/outsider distinction poses distinct methodological challenges. One is that the subtlety of insiders' understandings may be lost on outsider researchers to whom they are invisible (Cohen 1986: 9). Such researchers need to be sensitive to the subtleties of language, dress and demeanour if they are to capture the competing world views that exist among local people and not to mistake local arrangements for a more idealized, orderly and consensual version of community. A second challenge is that researchers in the field must resist the temptation to gravitate towards 'nice' people and to avoid potential respondents whose hostility to outsiders may include 'aggression, abuse, racist and sexist taunts, as well as simpler and less accountable "clashes of personalities"' (Payne 1996: 21-2). This is particularly important for women researchers. Close surveillance led Gill and Maclean to argue that 'a female ethnographer has certain limitations placed on her in terms of behaviour which may affect her ability to carry out research successfully' (2002: 1.2). Being gossiped about was one such constraint. This illustrates how researchers confront local power relations, including the power to exclude. Because community studies threaten to reveal things that residents might prefer to remain hidden, hostility to researchers is unsurprising. Scheper-Hughes encountered hostile responses during 'a moving and often painful return to "Ballybran"', the most extreme of which was that 'She should be shot' (2001: xvii-xviii).

Bell's injunction to study the locally powerful was derived from his perception that 'Sociology typically looks down the social structure from the top' (1978: 25). Bell and his colleagues' study of community power as part of their investigation of the power bestowed by rural property ownership has had few follow-up studies. This may reflect their finding that many potentially contentious matters fail to become manifest,

leaving them to ponder ‘Why are there so few issues?’ (Newby *et al.*, 1978: 424). Bell also noted that powerful groups have the power to control who gets to study what, although Gray’s study of an Australian country town argues that: ‘When the locally powerful are themselves politically divided, they can be studied without the problems of access which Bell anticipated’ (1991: 189). Studies of rural power relations are relatively few, but other ways exist of revealing how power operates locally. Scott’s *Weapons of the Weak* reports on ‘everyday forms of peasant resistance’ in the Malaysian village of ‘Sedaka’ because ‘most subordinate classes throughout most of history have rarely been afforded the luxury of open, organized, political activity’. Consequently Scott focuses on ‘small arms fire in the class war’ (1985: xv, 1). The subtlety of how power is exercised and resisted has also been a theme in the exploration of gender inequalities in recent rural community studies. Bell’s criticism of classic urban studies was that their methodology of collecting data during the working day meant that they contained ‘virtually no men’ (1990: 19). This is the reverse of the feminist critique of concentration exclusively on men, but it leads to the same conclusion: that studies of how patriarchy works need data on women and men and their interaction. Bell’s fieldwork for *Middle Class Families* therefore included data collection in the evening (1990: 19). McKee and Bell’s (1986) analysis of how men’s problems are transferred to women echoes the findings of Williams’s (1981) study of women’s subordination in a small Queensland mining town and Dempsey’s *A Man’s Town* which cites ‘numerous examples of the process of women’s inferiorization’ (1992: 175).

Theories

Bell's interest in the implications of geographical and social mobility for family, kinship and community relations was prompted by Rosser and Harris's (1965) *The Family and Social Change* and the 'rare imagination' with which these authors 'tell the story of urbanization and industrialization in West Glamorgan' (Bell 1990: 15). There is an enduring misconception that community studies are atheoretical. Numerous community studies, including rural community studies, have contributed significantly to theoretical debate and understanding (Crow 2002). Among the broad theoretical themes considered are concerns with secularization (Jamieson and Toynbee 1992; Thompson *et al.* 1983), de- and re-traditionalization (Neville 1994), proletarianization (Williams 1981), de-industrialization and social polarization (Pahl 1984; Warwick and Littlejohn 1992), marginalization (Dempsey 1990), counter-urbanization (Maclean 1997), suburbanization (Melko *et al.* 1994), and globalization (Sherlock 2002). In their different ways these studies all follow Hughes in approaching 'rural communities as gauges of change' (1971: 76).

Bell remarks about the Banbury re-study that such research needs 'some theory of social change' (1977: 61). He argued that the original study's theory of social change had been made untenable by the re-study's findings. His point is nevertheless consistent with the original study's objective of seeking 'to test some of the holistic ideas of the grander theorists on a smaller canvas' (Stacey *et al.* 1975: 2). This capacity to give abstract theories some grounding remains one of community studies' great strengths, and the need for such critical assessment is undiminished. Even theorists of social change whose work is more rooted in empirical data may develop theories of social change that are problematic. Here mention might be made of Gershuny's (2000: 11) distribution of our waking hours among, paid work, unpaid

work, and leisure or consumption, which has the unfortunate effect of screening out the dimension of community.

One reason for the neglect of community relationships in many social scientific writings is the problem of definition. Bell and Newby's comment that 'sociologists have frequently launched into defining community with a will bordering on gay abandon' (1971: 27) signals the problem. Their own (1976) attempt to impose order onto this situation highlights the dimension of 'communion' or 'community of feeling' in order to flag up the importance of subjective understandings in any explanation of community action. Willmott's (1986) distinction between 'place community', 'interest community' and 'community of attachment' also does this by distinguishing between the different things that community members may have in common. This three-fold classification can be extended to include a fourth dimension of community life, namely time (Crow and Allan 1995). Rural community studies have contributed to theorizing the temporal dimension of what holds people together as communities: Neville's (1994) study of annual rituals highlights the importance of rhythms, as does Warwick and Littlejohn's analysis of 'centripetal and centrifugal forces' (1992: 19) which develops the theme from the original Ashton study (Dennis *et al.* 1956/1969). Another example of how theoretical debates about community can be informed by earlier studies is Arensberg and Kimball's comment that 'the community extends backward and forward in time beyond the life history of any one individual' (1974: 340).

This point about community history stretching further back than the direct experience of their audiences helps to explain the appeal of scene-setting historical material in

community studies. This may be done through individual or family histories, as was the case with the story of 'The Hughes Family, Morriston' with which Rosser and Harris (1965: 4) open their account. Bell appreciated how this story 'shows how what we were already taking to be the "traditional working class" pattern of kinship and community both had comparatively little generational depth *and* was changing again under the impact of Nazi bombs, rehousing, slum clearance and the processes of both social and geographical mobility' (1990: 15, emphasis in original). Put another way, such individual family stories make real the abstract issue of structure and agency. Other examples of using particular people to give greater immediacy to abstract sociological ideas are Pahl's (1984: ch.11) discussion of the stories of two couples, Jim and Linda and Beryl and George, to illustrate the contemporary meaning of social polarization, and Scott's (1985) description of Razak to elaborate how local hierarchies work. Community studies provide a powerful platform for telling grand narratives in human terms.

Community studies as vehicles for developing social scientific arguments

Visual material offers another way in which community studies are particularly effective in giving readers a sense of life in a particular community. Harper has contested the conventional social scientific view that photographs are 'unnecessary but sometimes pleasant (and sometimes distracting) additions to the real (written) work' (1987: 11), and numerous examples of community studies could be cited in support of this argument (Crow 2000: 175-7). Of course, 'community' is an elusive phenomenon to capture on film, and the photographic portrayal of places and their inhabitants may need to be augmented by invitations to the reader's imagination. The position of the outsider excluded from access to community life is one familiar to

many researchers on arrival in the field. The suggestion that things will be revealed to be not as they appear at first is implied in Kideckel's account of driving through the Romanian countryside as 'the red-tiled roofs of Hîrseni come into view. As we approach Hîrseni commune in the spring, the villages seem just this side of paradise, though to get to them we have to pass under crackling power lines, which Olt Landers blame for all manner of ailments' (1993: 12). A further technique found of captivating readers involves sharing local gossip. Some of the most engaging passages in community studies revolve around gossip, and Bell quite understandably sought 'to systematically collect as much of it as possible' (1968: 139).

The difficulty of defining 'community' also makes it difficult to define what constitutes a community study. Not all dictionaries of sociology include an entry for community studies. One that does defines a community study as 'the empirical (usually ethnographic) study of the social relations and social structure within a clearly defined locality' (Jary and Jary 1991: 102). This reveals the difficulty of the exercise, because the relationship between community and locality is problematic. As many of their titles suggest, rural community studies have often been studies of villages, but 'community is not just a sense of division between "us in this locality" and the rest of the world' (Crow and Maclean 2006: 308), and the community studies approach is flexible enough to accommodate this fact. At their best community studies show how the various parts of a community, including those that spill beyond local geographical boundaries, fit together and how the whole of the community is greater than the sum of its individual parts.

Community studies also have the potential to produce surprising findings. Some communities can be ‘unexpected’, to use Hochschild’s (1973) term. Rural communities fitting this description might include Williams’s (1991) *The Welsh in Patagonia*, or Edmondson’s (2000) discovery of a forward-looking orientation among the people of the rural West of Ireland who are typically characterised as traditionalists. Another is Harris’s discovery that the two communities she studied in the North and the South of Ireland had remarkably similar lines of division despite the fact that ‘On the surface, Patricksville and Ballybeg differ radically’ (1996: 551). And, finally, it is worth remembering that although recent rural research has gone beyond the sociology of agriculture, farming issues remain pertinent. This is illustrated well by Bennett *et al.*’s finding that in Cumbria in the wake of the devastation of the foot and mouth epidemic, ‘Almost all of the farmers interviewed were expecting to continue farming and many to return to previous levels of activity’ (2002: 115). Their argument that the community context was influential in farming families’ decisions not to move out in these circumstances is a good example of the sort of social science that Bell wanted to see developed, combining the detail of ‘face to face, local and small’ social structures with the bigger picture brought by ‘political economy’ (1978: 37).

Conclusion

The contribution of community studies to social scientific knowledge has been extensive and varied. According to Brunt, they have ‘greatly stimulated the maturing of the social sciences’ (2001: 86), for example through their emphasis on the importance of the method of observation and of the contextualisation of findings. This contribution has evolved as methodological innovations have been adopted and as

communities have taken on novel forms. Further developments will undoubtedly continue to pose new challenges, and community studies, rural and other, promise to continue to respond to such challenges. The argument developed here is that they have particular contributions to make to debates about comparison, methodological rigour, theoretical purpose, and social scientific imagination.

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